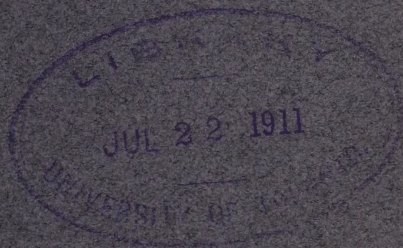


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ACHILLES

ROGER M. HEATH



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ACHILLES

THE
NEWDIGATE PRIZE POEM
1911

BY
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MCMXI

Ἐς δὲ τὸν λοιπὸν χρόνον ἥρωες ἀγνοὶ
πρὸς ἀνθρώπων καλέονται.

ACHILLES.

O SEARCHERS of the sky-sill who have drawn
A garland of strange spells from outland places,
Of men that sail the high seas, with the dawn
About them and the salt wind in their faces :
Of the lost lore that lingers from of old
In upland countries :—singers that have told
 Of wandering and warring races
That break from cloudy passes to the sunlit wold ;

I wish I had a little of the skill
Wherewith ye wrought old tales of many nations,
A little of the power that reads at will
The riddles of a hundred generations.—
For many ancient legends, tho' their birth
Is hidden, have been weighed and found of worth
 In highways and lone habitations,
In all the ages of the unforgetting earth.

The half-remembered prowess of dead kings
 And strange adventures of our fathers, cleaving
 New pathways in their endless wanderings,
 Grew dim and faded in the distance, leaving
 A heritage of tangled memories,
 Sea-faring and old wars and destinies;

And these we still remember weaving
 In a new web of dreams old tales from overseas.

* * * * *

In the forgotten days, when far away
 The long wars of the river-empires rumbled,
 And in great plains beneath the dawn of day
 Peoples and dynasties arose and crumbled,
 The old thalassocrats and merchant-kings
 Filled the Ægean with their scurrying wings,
 While at their prows the green seas tumbled,
 And dolphins swam to guide them in their journeyings.

Then by the Black Sea and the Danube's mouth
 Horde after horde of warriors came, and blended
 With older tribes, and went into the South:
 And Troy upon its hill grew tall and splendid,
 Rich in new Northern blood and mastery,
 And borrowed wisdom of the Ægean sea.

Thither the caravans descended
 From the hill-country of the East unceasingly.

For in those days, in the dim time of myths,
 Great nations slowly grew to being, under
 The hammers of the hidden powers, the smiths;
 They forged them like new swords to cleave asunder
 The bonds of the old world, and on the blade
 Strange runes of utter loveliness they laid,
 To move the hearts of men to wonder,
 To be a song still young while ages flower and fade.

So silently a new age came to birth.
 Hellas, new-risen on the hills, was throwing
 The splendour of its morning on the earth—
 The sun was up, and the dawn-breezes blowing
 When in the glades the boy Achilles ran
 Climbing great hills as the long days began,
 Light-heartedly, yet somehow knowing
 That sorrow should be his, and fame, and a short span.

In him there lived strange echoes of the past,
 Of red cliffs, and the people slowly wending
 Amid the hills to find a home at last;
 And Zeus his forefather, the hill-god, sending
 His children forth with a great part to play
 In the world's wars, Zeus dwelling far away
 In high Dodona, still defending
 The folk that he had led into the light of day.

Sprung from old savage chieftains was this boy
 Who was to sit in sullen anger, taking
 His fill of vengeance by the ships at Troy.
 Yet in Achilles the new time was waking,
 Most simple and most lovable and wise,
 But kindled with a flame that never dies:

The soul of Hellas in the making
 Mixed with the old wrath of the mountains in his eyes.

So all about him on the hill-tops grey
 The future and the past were met together.
 Yet both seemed dim and little as he lay,
 Watching the great sea in the sunny weather,
 Living that life which is the same always
 Wherever there are boys and summer days,
 In asphodel or in the heather,
 In wet and windy creeks or in blue laughing bays.

He scoured the lonely cliffs and valleys wild,
 Hearing the sea-gulls call to one another,
 While far below the great Ægean smiled:
 (There dwelt the lady of the seas, his mother,
 In the old tale). He thought he could descry
 Far off amid the clouds those mountains high,
 The cradle of his race: far other
 The isle of Skyros where he lay beneath the sky.

For the hill-born Achaïans were beginning
 To sail among the islands, and to ponder
 On new lands lying ready for the winning.
 The men that in the hills were wont to wander,
 Were rivals now of the sea-folk of yore,
 Singers and craftsmen, dwellers on the shore,
 Eager to fare abroad and squander
 The garnered might of years in one long glorious war.

The stronghold at the meeting of the ways
 Had grown to greatness, Ilion the Golden,
 A city very famous in those days.
 Wide power it had and riches, to embolden
 The warlike tribes against it and draw down
 Swift doom and sudden end of its renown.

There the Achaïan chiefs were holden,
 Warring for ten long years about the windy town.

In after days men dreamed of that old time
 When all the tribes of Greece together banded ;
 And the great quest grew wonderful in rhyme :
 New Dorians and old Achaïans handed
 That ancient story on from sire to son—
 How once the men of Hellas, every one,
 Went sailing overseas and landed
 Upon the plains of Troy, and how great deeds were done.

And the old quest for plunder and for glory
 Grew afterwards more noble in the telling,
 And singers fashioned the immortal story
 Of Lady Helena, in Sparta dwelling,
 Whose face was lovely as the dawn of day
 Upon the hills of morning far away.

It was her beauty, far excelling
 All else in the wide world, that led them to the fray.

So the high-hearted heroes, in the song,
 Sailed to win back again the goddess' daughter,
 And after many years avenged that wrong
 And wandered home across the wide sea-water.
 That tale was ringing like a paean when
 All Hellas stood together once again,

And filled the narrow seas with slaughter,
 And broke the lordly spirit of presumptuous men.

But sorrowful it sounded on the air,
 When nought but memory was still remaining
 Of the old unity recorded there :
 When all the land was full of ceaseless straining
 And shafts by city against city hurled :
 When Hellas to its destiny was whirled

And lay most lovely in its waning,
 To be for evermore the wonder of the world.

II

And ever in those tales Achilles stood
Far foremost, with the heroes all around him,
First of the Hellenes and a warrior good;
With loveliness and might the gods had crowned him;
Out of the sea great dreams had come to him
Clear visions, tho' the end of them was dim,
 Came sailing on the winds and found him
Gazing with troubled eyes upon the great sea's rim.

But into his whole soul the great wrath passed,
And out of anger came most bitter sorrow,
And his unclouded life was overcast,
And fame and warfare and the glorious morrow
Dwindled before him. So he went clear-eyed
To meet the doom that had been prophesied,
 And from good memories sought to borrow
Some gladness for the days still left him ere he died.

And the Achaian empire of his dream,
That was to rise with him as its defender,
Builded upon the waters with the gleam
Of clouds at sunset,—all this power and splendour
Upon the restless sea that he had crossed
For the last time, impatiently he tossed,
 And now he only strove to render
Some recompense to that good friend that he had lost.

And when the only hope that he still cherished
 Had been accomplished, then for all his grieving
 He lived with kind words on his lips, and perished
 At the appointed hour, without achieving
 Aught of his dream. He lived not to destroy
 The hated town, nor saw that hour of joy,
 Thin flames and long smoke-tresses weaving
 A net of death about the pleasant towers of Troy.

And after that glad hour of victory
 The might of the Achaian peoples faded.
 The great siege and the wanderings on the sea
 Had thinned them: for a little while they waded
 Through the long shoals of warfare, till at last
 They fled to lonely fastnesses, outcast,
 While young tribes from the hills invaded
 The goodly valleys where they ruled in ages past.

But for the warriors of that time always
 The road they strove to walk upon was paven
 With tales of the great strife in the old days.
 Achilles and his story were engraven
 In Hellas' memory. In camp and mart,
 In many a Dorian village far apart,
 In many a thronged Ionian haven,
 They sang his valour and his nobleness of heart.

Strangely his story shone amid the gloom
 Of that old chronicle of war and plunder—
 His beauty and the wrath that was his doom,
 His great love and the grief he laboured under,
 His short and troubled life. They saw him stand
 Most pitiful and lonely in the sand ;

And they that heard began to wonder
 What recompense he found in the dim, unknown land.

And even he who wrote the Odyssey,
 Most simple-hearted of the story-makers,
 Who wrought a tale of life most truthfully,—
 Of ships and laughter and the roaring breakers,
 And marvels clear and limpid as a day
 Of early summer,—turned his eyes away
 From sunshine to the shadowy acres,
 Where the dead heroes wandered in the twilight grey.

There in the sunless country of the dead,
 In the thin mist, he found Achilles, yearning
 To see again the blue sky overhead,
 Still sad and gracious, yet no longer burning
 To scour the earth, but rather to abide
 A long time in a quiet countryside
 Tilling the soil and then returning
 To the still, windless land of shadows, satisfied,

But there came one who could not understand
 That nobleness should be so unavailing,
 And dreamed of a sea-circled western land
 Where was a radiance and light unfailing—
 Pindar, who found new beauty intertwined
 With ancient lore fast fading out of mind,
 Who sang of his forefathers sailing
 Into new seas, and climbing in the mountain wind.

The first great hope that was upon the earth
 Had touched him. And for those souls who unknotted
 Six threads of life, who climbed from birth to birth
 Courageously and stood at last unspotted,—
 For them he saw a good hope and a rest
 From trouble in the island of the blest :
 To them the wise gods had allotted
 Their portion in the sea-washed meadows of the west.

But they who in a single life unravelled
 The tangled threads, went by the straight road thither,
 Leaving the long and weary wheel untravelled.
 And straightway to that pleasant country, whither
 No bitterness can come, the goddess bore
 Her son Achilles from the dust of war.
 There in the flowers that never wither
 He found the gladness of dead summer-times once more,

But for the villagers of hill and shore,
The heroes were the dead men, mighty-hearted,
Who walk the ways of earth for evermore;
At dead of night the strayed wayfarer started
In sudden fear to see Achilles stand
By a tall spinney in a lonely land,
 And moonbeams where the clouds had parted
Shone on his armour and the great spear in his hand.

We too behold him still, amid the store
Of Aryan tales his name and legend keeping,
With Sigurd Sigmund's son and many more,
The short-lived chiefs, on whom the storms came
 sweeping,
Clouded with love and misery even thus,
And bore them far in waters perilous.
 Now after sorrow they lie sleeping,
And as clear, wondrous dreams they live again for us.

